

# **The Sacrificial Victim in Sam's Buried Child**

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**Violence provides domestic drama with its form and content: violent acts delineated by violent acts. In this paper the researcher would examine in detail the selected play of Sam Shepard, the Buried Child within the context of its obsession with family violence. In this play, what should defy the idea of family serves instead to defy it. None of the violence is random or impersonal: everyone is releted by the blood in his veins as well as the blood he spills. But as Rene Girard argues, violence often results when difference and distinction (within a family or an entire culture ) collapse; violence is the reflex action of a cultural system attempting to reassert its own itegrity and difference, and thus its identity. Using archetypical examples from Greek and Jacobean drama, the reseacher will examine the family as a dramatic unit by focusing on certain members of the family of violence to investigate a time-honoured dramatic tradition the violation of the family by the family and for the family.**

In other words, without violence in families, the drama would have no form, but neither would the family: violence endows family drama with more than a reason for being; finally violence is its being, creating an identity for both the drama and the family portrayed. In the past, violence most often took the form of revenge, an attempt to right the family wrong. Usually perpetrated by some outside force. In modern drama, vengeance continues to be an endless obligation, revenge still a family affair, perhaps more so now, for the violence which used to extend beyond the family is now contained by it : modern man attempts to right the family wrong by pointing out the perpetrator but his sphere of reference has been compressed, its circumference now limited to the family circle. In a detailed examination of the selected play of Sam Shepard the Burried Child, the researcher plans to trace the lineage of the family of violence from its Greek and Jacobean forbears and forbearers to the modern oedipal equivalents, whose role in life was not foretold by Freud , but rather determined by a system of violent checks and balances described by Rene Girard in his sociological treatise, violence and the Sacred . Now Lear is played in the living room, but it is time we overcame our strutheous insistence that family violence is a divisive element; as demonstrated in domestic drama of the twentieth century, violence promotes family unity by providing a shared

identity.

In violence and the Sacred, Rene Girard explicates the shared identity of the two constructs of his title ( finally , violence is the sacred), ( ١ ) " In attempting to decipher the myths of which the tragedies themselves constitute the first efforts at decipherment, " ( ٢ ) Girard limits himself to an analysis of ancient drama, but the researcher plans to show how this insights, among others, can serve as the organizing principle for a study of that most sacred and violent of institutions—the modern American family – as seen in the selected work of Shepard. Girard's system of ritualized destructive behaviour continues to fit the scheme of things in modern times as we watch the same cautionary tales, the same potential for greatness made into something grotesque. The family continually verges on destruction and, as is made painfully clear, suffers at its own hands . But it is a violation of the family by the family for the family: as Girard demonstrates, the family regenerates itself as a result of these unconsciously orchestrated purges, required by the disastrous order of society, requited only in the sacrificial death of one of its members.

In forging his theories on the two-edged sword of sacrifice , for " (there is) hardly any form of violence (that) cannot be described in terms of sacrifice, " ( ٣ ) Girard cuts through what he considers the

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unnecessary moral distinctions of guilt and innocence, good and evil : there is never really a question of " expiation" as a result of the sacrificial act, at once both a sacred obligation and criminal activity. In choosing a sacrificial or " surrogate" victim and ritually executing is murder , the sacrificer negotiates not with any form of divinity nor an entity larger-than-life. Instead he mediates between man and man, providing a sacrificial substitution for the violence which will not be denied but must be displaced : " The sacrifice serves to protect the community from its own violence ... the purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community to reinforce the social fabric. " ( ٤ ) To save the community from itself , to suppress the internal violence, the dissension and rivalry which would destroy it , an implosive rather than explosive process, a sacrificial victim is chosen , generally from the fringes of society, though dramatic exceptions such as Oedipus can also be used to prove the dramatic rule. The successful sacrifice is " violence without fear of vengeance" due to the character of the " indifferent " victim : " the desire to commit an act of violence on those near us cannot be suppressed without a conflict; we must divert that impulse , therefore, toward the sacrificial victim, the creature we can strike down fear of reprisal, since he lacks a champion. " ( ٥ ) Though this system seems simple enough, " The celebrants do not and must not comprehend the true role of the

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sacrificial act, " ( ٦ ) in part because the function of sacrifice is often obscured by " the awesome machinery of ritual "(٧): " Men can dispose of their violence more efficiently if they regard the process not as something emanating from within themselves, but as a necessity imposed from without, a divine decree whose least infraction calls down terrible punishment. " ( ٨) But its meaning remains: In a universe where the slightest dispute can lead to disaster – just like a slight cut can prove fatal to a hemophiliac-the rites of sacrifice serve to polarize to community's aggressive impulses and redirect them toward victims that may be actual or figurative, animate or inanimate , but that are always incapable of propagating further vengeance.

The sacrificial process furnishes an outlet for those violent impulses that cannot be mastered by self-restraint; a partial outlet, to be sure, but always renewable, and one whose efficacy has been attested by an impressive number of reliable witnesses. The sacrificial process prevents the spread of violence by keeping vengeance in check."( ٩)

The violent act is not simply preventive medicine : it furnishes as well the pound of cure in imposing temporary form of cultural stability , according to the elaborate system delineated by Girard .

Though society knows not what it does, there is nothing random about the violent hacking that takes place – the community , considered as a large family clan , may be in crisis but its surrogate is carefully chosen according to a time and place which deem him suitable, and coincidentally " guilty." Worthy of sacrifice because he lacks a crucial social link , the victim can take many forms . In ancient Greece , the " pharmakos" was born and bred to fill this role and , as Girard points out , " in many primitive societies children who had not yet undergone the rites of initiation have no proper place in the community; their rights and duties are almost non-existent " ( ١٠ ) So they will serve . This practice persists into the twentieth century , along with the sacrificer's misunderstanding , if not total ignorance , of the meaning of his action.

### Child's Play

The motif of the buried child , the child as surrogate victim , is discussed as well as the ramifications for its parents and sacrificers. Shepard's Buried child , a child is born and buried: his life provides the secret that the family is dying to keep. The ritual sacrifice of the child at the hands of its parents is intended to end the disintegration of the family-in-fragments and provide a starting point for restabilized cultural order. Children supply the hope for the future

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by not actively participating in it; the family line is continued by sons whose violent deaths regenerate their source. Ironically, had they lived, the family would surely have been destroyed.

We can see one model of this pattern--the son's violent death regenerating the family (ironically) as well as the community--in the life of Oedipus; indeed, Oedipus presents, in Girard's analysis, the preeminent instance of such a sacrifice. Girard uses Sophocles' Oedipus Rex to demonstrate how the sacrificial victim is chosen and what constitutes the sacrificial crisis, the moment of his necessity. Basically, Girard sees all violence as mimetic in nature, an imitation which proves to be the severest form of flattery:

At the core of the Oedipus myth, as Sophocles presents it, is the proposition that all masculine relationships are based on reciprocal acts of violence. Laius, taking his cue from the oracle, violently rejects Oedipus out of fear that his son will seize his throne and invade his conjugal bed. Oedipus, taking his cue from the oracle, does away with Laius, violently rebuffs the sphinx, then takes their places--as king and "scourge of the city," respectively. Again, Oedipus, taking his cue from the oracle, plots the death of that unknown figure who may be seeking to usurp his own position. Oedipus, Creon, and Tiresias, each taking his cue from the oracle, seek one another's downfall. All these acts of violence gradually

wear away the differences that exist not only in the same family but throughout the community. <sup>(١١)</sup>

From this tripartite combat, a sacrificial crisis results when all distinctions, both individual and societal, disappear, endangering the cultural order of the entire community. “This cultural order is nothing more than a regulated system of distinctions in which the differences among individuals are used to establish their ‘identity’ and their mutual relationships.”<sup>(١٢)</sup> Order is dependent upon cultural distinctions: “the loss of them gives birth to fierce rivalries and sets members of the same family or social group at one another’s throats.”<sup>(١٣)</sup>

The disaster of Oedipus Rex is not, in Girard’s analysis the result of divine premeditation or a tragic hero’s failing but rather follows the dissolution of all differences between the protagonists, coincident with “the dissolution by reciprocal violence of those very values and distinctions around which the conflict of the play supposedly revolves.”<sup>(١٤)</sup> As Girard continues, “Oedipus’ imminent fall has nothing to do with any heinous sin; rather it should be regarded as the outcome of a tragic encounter in which Oedipus has met defeat.” <sup>(١٥)</sup> Creon, Tiresias, and Oedipus all desire the same thing, and as a result of their shared hubris, each feels himself



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capable of providing an answer to the question that plagues them. Their peculiar illusion of superiority makes them at the same time brothers and enemies: "Each sees in the other the usurper of a legitimacy that he thinks he is defending but that he is in fact undermining. Anything one may affirm or deny about either of the adversaries seem instantly applicable to the other. Reciprocity is busy aiding each party in its own destruction."<sup>(16)</sup> In their debate, Oedipus and Tiresias act as duelling truth-tellers, threatening to be the first to provide an answer, but Creon's role in the scheme of things might seem outside the frame of symmetrical reference. In fact, he too is an enemy brother (or brother-in-law) by virtue of his desire for the city: "It is my city, too"<sup>(17)</sup> he informs Oedipus during their argument. Oedipus considers Creon's imputations to be a treasonable act, but as Girard explains "The chorus insists that Creon does not deserve punishment; he should be allowed to withdraw in peace. Oedipus yields to their request, but reluctantly, and he reminds the chorus once again of the true nature of this struggle whose outcome is still unclear. To spare an enemy brother from death and exile is to condemn oneself to death and exile: 'Well, then, let him depart--though his departure means my certain death, or else my ignominious expulsion from Thebes.'<sup>(18)</sup> Ever the

bureaucrat, Creon is also the man who would and will be king “If I were king, I should be a slave to policy,” he says as he muses on a condition he is not supposed to covet, for it would mean exchanging his “untroubled influence” for Oedipus-influenced trouble, “this ease for that anxiety.” (١٩)

But tragedy must distinguish hero from villain, and in Oedipus Rex this fundamental need is answered by the invocation of the mythical Oedipus to resolve the dilemma of his dramatic counterpart. As Girard insists: “If the myth does not explicitly set forth the problem of differences, it nonetheless manages to resolve the problem in a manner both brutal and categorical. The solution involves patricide and incest. In the mythical version of the story the issue of reciprocity--the identity of Oedipus with the others--never arises. One can assert with total conviction that Oedipus is unique in at least one respect: he alone is guilty of patricide and incest. He is presented as a monstrous exception to the general run of mankind; he resembles nobody and nobody resembles him.” (٢٠) Oedipus’ crimes are particularly appropriate since they signify the abolition of differences between father and son, not only because Oedipus has usurped his father’s position in his mother’s affections, but because the patricide itself is a reciprocal exchange of murderous gestures.

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Laius delivered the first blow and managed to do so twice in one lifetime: at the crossroads of Corinth and in the infanticide attempted (at Laius' instigation) years earlier. As Girard points out: "Incestuous propagation leads to formless duplications, sinister repetitions, a dark mixture of unnamable things."<sup>(21)</sup> Yet the end products of incest are propagated not only by Oedipus but by Creon and Tiresias as well: "a dark mixture of unnamable things" (otherwise known as the truth) is what Tiresias has suppressed but saved all these years, and "formless duplications, sinister repetitions" provide the procedural-minded Creon with his answer for everything. Oedipus is not solely responsible for the sacrificial crisis nor is he the only choice for sacrificial victim; as accusations are interchanged, everyone participates in the destruction of the cultural order: "The blows exchanged by enemy brothers may not always land on the mark, but every one of them deals a staggering blow to the institutions of monarchy and religion. Each party progresses rapidly in uncovering the truth about the other, without ever recognizing the truth about himself."<sup>(22)</sup> All roads lead to the same cultural disintegration, enacted in triplicate by the enemy brothers representing the religious, military, and sovereign paths to disaster. And none is the road less traveled by.

With the revelation of Oedipus' past, he becomes the likeliest candidate for sacrificial victimization, in part because of his resemblance to the Thebans; in ruling them he sets an example, but one which none will follow (or as Freud might suggest, only in their dreams) since he is the accused murderer of his father and husband of his mother. The sacrifice is unanimously accepted and will not engender an act of reprisal--Thebes' champion is now championless. Since the entire community, save one, agrees on this choice, a temporary but convincing form of cultural stability, a "unanimity-minus-one" (۲۳) sets in, lasting until the next sacrificial crisis. The efficacy of this form of sacrifice (versus the endless obligation of revenge) affords a cure of slightly longer term, though differences within the community inevitably give way to more permanent forms of hate, demonstrated in the irregular cycles of violence which evolve as society as the whole, the family in particular, creates and simultaneously denies its own differences.

Oedipus insists that he is "a child of Luck; [he] cannot be dishonored." (۲۴) This assertion reverberates as ironically for him as it does for the surrogate victims of The Buried Child, whose silence on the subject is all we hear. Yet its silence is central to all the family drama ; the son is martyred for the sake of the family which must

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dismember itself to remain whole. The pleas of this unlucky child go unheeded or, as far as the audience is concerned, unheard, for his life and more importantly his death take place offstage, the classical device grafted onto a modern sensibility which hardly flinches in the face of violence acted on the stage. By using the child as sacrificial victim, the sacrificer manages to deflect the violence intended for him (and engendered by him) onto another part of himself, his offspring. In Buried Child, the cyclical nature of the sacrificial crisis is dramatically portrayed by the literal if grisly reappearance of the child who died in order to deflect the violence imploding within the family. As Dodge explains: "We couldn't let a thing like that continue. We couldn't allow that to grow up right in the middle of our lives. It made everything we'd accomplished look like it was nothin'. Everything was cancelled out by this one mistake. This one weakness." (۲۵) Born into a family of brothers and sons, the unnamed child is both; the product of incest, he shares both his brothers and his father's generation, yet another lost son in the family tradition (Vince, Tilden, Ansel, and Bradley have all been "lost" according to various meanings of the word). He is even like Dodge, with whom he shares no biological connection, like Dodge, another invisible man. The victim, like the sacrifice itself, assumes a

dual identity; he must be at least two things to all people, an object to be venerated and villified, paradoxically designated as “special” and therefore suitable for sacrifice due to the commonalities he shares with society at large, yet still an outsider, not so much the same that he can a fly be considered one of them. The sacrifice of the buried child serves its purpose until the entire community realizes what certain individuals (Dodge, even Bradley) had always known: the sacrifice is but a temporary placation of violence, in this case, domestic. Even when the victim is suitable and the sacrifice a success, the criminal communion will be repeated at regular intervals; like life it is cyclical, its beginning and end illusory in its permanence, a cycle incomplete for as long as it exists, then not completed but non-existent.

### Buried Child

A little more than kin and less than kind.

*Hamlet (I.ii. 70)*

Family drama is enduring staple of the American tradition, which attempts, in all its art forms , to forge an identity for a nation so diffuse that its whole is the sum of seemingly unrelated parts . The visionary emphasis on the well-ordered and healthy family as perhaps the highest good has frequently found its reflection in the

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history of American drama. Yet in the modern period, this vision of health gives way to more specular and often spectacular visions of familial disease, as we move from the cheerful and beneficent symbolism of the first family ruling the country the Manson family terrorizing it ( ٢٦) . Even the definition of "family" is stretched and twisted in these later plays : the more modern the play the more dissimilar the elements that make up the family. Many modern American dramas seem dedicated to the proposition that the individuals presented as a family share nothing more than the stage itself. And yet, the more disparate the parts, the tighter the whole and the hold they have over each other.

The boundaries that mark the family circle are formed by blood lines , not simply what courses through one's veins, but what carries one through life. This connection between the families in Shepard's and Albee's plays for instance is indeed a blood line, a heritage of violent acts which compose their domestic drama and lead to the recurring paradox. The violence of earlier dramatic periods becomes internalized into the family in modern American drama , the dissension which should deny the idea of family serves instead to define it. These families make contact by embracing their violent past and imposing it on succeeding generations. By comparing Albee's

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The American Dream and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, and our concerned play Buried Child , we find that in The American Dream, the mutilation of an infant gives shape to the play and serves as the frame for the family portrait. Whether their role is active or passive , some characters are not willing participants in the violent act of succession, but their resistance is usually overcome by the need to belong , as Vince demonstrates in Buried Child , for example proving himself the son of his father in revealing the child buried in the man . The connective cruelties which stitch the patchwork of fun and games in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf ? also pattern the lives of the play's chief protagonists and antagonists . George and Martha , who on so short an acquaintance, can hardly be first in the hearts of Nick and Honey, share with them the need to create a detailed mythology for daily living, forged, as all myths are, in violence and sacrifice. All four must exorcise the terrifying image of the child who does not exist, and never did, but which serves as the basis and sustaining illusion of their respective marriages.

The violence which prevails the American drama is more than an exercise in cunning or an attempt to catalogue the mental and physical cruelty of which man is capable. Violence suffered by dramatic characters is inflicted by extension upon the other, more



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passive participants in the drama—the audience, who experience this pain at a safer distance but feel it nonetheless. A few perverse thrills can be used to shore some otherwise shaky dramaturgy on the theory that, if we are afraid to look , then maybe we won't notice the structural defects of inferior drama. But Albee and Shepard , to the contrary , dispense punishment with a purpose – whether in the form of punchlined chatter or the shocking revelation of a secret better left buried . The nature of the violence in these plays is intensified to the most excruciating levels because none of it is random or impersonal: everyone is related by the blood in their veins as well as the blood they spill. The violent impulses of these characters find no release beyond the boundaries of the family , but instead rebound inwardly, the frustration of the thwarted exterior release redoubling the savagery of internal warfare. The stage reflects not familial caring but chaos , not vitality but violence, with the image of the ideal family turning into a receding vision , if not an outright illusion, all done with mirrors , to amaze and confound us.

The cultural function of the family is to reproduce itself, to produce children who will in turn form new families; this generative process inevitably generates its own violent transitions , as Rene Girard has argued. But Albee and Shepard have a graphically

horrifying vision of the particular kind of violence which arises : it is directed against children. Their plays are themselves , in their way , children's stories , each focusing on the life of a child filtered through an adult sensibility, and making use of both fact and fantasy as tools for teaching a cautionary tale. To term these plays as children's stories might seem an ironic notion, for children are seldom seen and never heard, but only heard about. It is , in fact, the ominous and total absence of the children which so frightens us. Children exist only as legends , whispered allusions , ghosts . It exists only and structured around the absence of the child ; it is a missing center which must be found or confronted before life can go on. In Buried child, when one of the children actually is brought on stage, it is the very presence of the child, even more than its hideously repulsive condition as a corpse, which shocks us. As the chief recipient of family violence in our play, the child becomes increasingly emblematic of everything that is wrong in this family ; the agent of regeneration has turned instead into the occasion of retribution all the family's jaundiced illusions are wrapped up in this bundle of joy.

The missing child haunt this play in the denied meaning which it represents ; but it lives on, curiously, in some of the language and actions of his parents , as if , like the children in Seneca's Thyestes,

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the parents had eaten them , or at least absorbed them. Shepard fill the parents' mouths with baby –talk, their own speech contaminated by what they are trying so hard to suppress.

Both Albee's and Shepard's plays are children plays which are ironically gruesome cautionary tales don't cry or your tongue will be cut out. They have many of the elements of fairy tales, which of course allow, even require , a therapeutic dose of violence in them. Yet as fairy tales , these dramas are merely grim, inverted fables not the wicked which but the child himself will be shoved into the oven ; the ritualistic rescue of the endangered child never takes place, and a scarifice is substituted. Tales designed to entertain children are often lessons on how- to and how-not-to-live in the world , complete with a moral reverates beyond the elements of fantasy which initially intrigued us, as the monster-laden tales make startling but remarkably staightforward translation into reality . In our play , the folks –next –door can become furies at a moment's notice, monsters made real with relatives ease: no fire – breathing dragons are necessary when venom – spewing Medusas are readily available and just as frightening. Shepard shows us that if the child is father to the man, the man will more often than not destroy the father, in a kind of

psychological translation, by destroying the child as well. Our play speak to the child in all of us and we should attend.

The opening moments are critical to a drama's success, for the author must not only set the scene but immediately engage the audience, giving some indication of what to expect without telegraphing his punches and giving away the unexpected, the turn of phrase or turn of events that will set apart this play from its predecessors. In Buried Child Sam Shepard encapsulates this exposition, compressing his opening remarks into a single sound--a cough--repeated several times during the first two acts, then abandoned. Though undeniably contemporary in its presentation of family life circa 1979, Buried Child is decidedly Jacobean in its outlook, as Shepard illuminates a family facing as bleak and uncertain a future as those portrayed by playwrights such as Tourneur and Webster, who lit the way to come with the same flickering hope. In Jacobean drama, the arrival of an important character or moment might be signalled by a trumpet's blare; in Shepard's play, the state of affairs is heralded by another form of reveille, a less stately but still revelatory sound--Dodge's cough. Dodge coughs at the opening of the play; he coughs at Tilden's entrance, "a violent, spasmodic coughing attack" (p. 68), and again whenever the

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vaguest allusion is made to the family secret buried in the backyard."very thin and sickly looking, in his late seventies" (p.63), Dodge is clearly a sick man, but the repetition of this sound indicates more than a scratch in the throat; it is Shepard's means of scratching the surface, of indicating the emotional and physical distress of the family without saying a word. Though repeated only a few times, this device is done to death: the cough comes to a logical conclusion in building to a death rattle: Dodge dies before the play ends. But the sound hangs in the air, echoing not only Dodge's lack of well-being but the general disease that permeates the family scene. Something is rotten in the state of Illinois, a corruption indicative of the American family, in general, a dying breed bent on its own destruction.(26).

In the late sixteenth century, as it became increasingly clear that Elizabeth would die without producing an heir, the question of succession became an issue of uncertainty which pervaded not only the court but the kingdom at large. In the late twentieth century, questions of succession are still being asked-not who will be king but who will be kin--and as Buried Child demonstrates, the answers are still contingent upon blood lines. The play focuses on the return of Vince, grandson to Dodge and heir to the family fortunes, as eldest son of the eldest son. Vince comes home after an absence of six years

“to pick up where he left off” (p. ۱۱۹), as Shelly, his girl friend and travel companion, tries to explain, though Vince’s rationalization for returning is as nebulous as his reason for leaving: neither good nor bad feeling seems to accompany either. A brief glance at the family portrait only enhances the question of why Vince would want to go home again. Dodge, the decrepit patriarch of this unnamed family, sits on the sofa, watching a television which is rarely turned off, though no sound and no image, only a flickering blue light, is emitted from the screen. Dodge’s wife, Halie, spends most of her time, and the bulk of the play, away from home, or at least away from him; their conversations take place in separate rooms, as he sits in the first floor living room, hacking away, while she hacks away at him, unseen, from the second floor landing at the top of the stairs. Halie spends much of her time with Father Dewis, the local cleric, with whom she enjoys what seems to be a satisfying mingling of the sacred and the profane. Vince has come to visit his grandparents enroute to New Mexico to see his own father, Tilden. But Tilden is not in New Mexico, he is in the kitchen. In his late forties, dressed like a construction worker, Tilden has also returned home after a long absence, and the reasons for his visit are equally vague. Tilden admits to having been “kicked out of New Mexico” (p. ۷۶), and several references are made to a drinking problem and time spent in jail. But

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his present physical condition bears watching, for “ something about him is profoundly burned out and displaced (p. ٦٩). As Halie explains: “We have to watch him just like we used to now. Just like we always did. He’s still a child” (p. ٧٧). Tilden’s reduced circumstances seem even more diminished in light of what his parents considered a promising past. As Halie reminds all within hearing:

...Tilden’s the oldest. I always thought he’d be the one to take responsibility. I had no idea in the world that Tilden would be so much trouble. Who would’ve dreamed. Tilden was an All-American, don’t forget. Don’t forget that Fullback. Or quarterback. I forget which.

TILDEN: (to himself) Fullback. (p. ٧٢)

Halie and Dodge had two other sons, Bradley, who lost his leg in a run-in with a chain saw, and Ansel, who lost his life in a run-in with the Mob. As far as Halie is concerned, “Of course, he’d still be alive today if he hadn’t married into the Catholics. The Mob...When he gave her the ring, I knew he was a dead man...I knew he’d never come back from the honeymoon. I kissed him and he felt like a corpse” (p. ٧٣.. ٧٤). Ansel is the most revered of the sons because he now exists only in Halie’s imagination; no reality contends with her illusions about this son, so her dream remains untarnished and

undiminished. Bradley's place in the family picture is the most perplexing, however, caught between Tilden and Ansel, the harsh reality and the carefully maintained illusion of what might have been. Bradley has always been the least of the sons, but now he terrifies Tilden, who flees at the sight of him; later, Bradley butchers what remains of Dodge's hair, giving his sleeping father an unwanted haircut. "Everything's turned around now. Full circle. Isn't that funny?" (p. 107) Bradley asks Shelly before providing the climactic action of the second act by forcing his fingers into her mouth in a symbolic image of rape. Impotent but still violent, the self-mutilated Bradley never fully fits in; his place in the proceedings is both problematic and emblematic.

He stands as a symbol of his relations, in metonymic correspondence to the family which dismembers itself, in the violent hacking away of the parts to the whole, by refusing to remember or acknowledge what makes up a family or who its members should be.

In making this return visit, Vince proves that you can't go home again, but for reasons rarely encountered....the family he left behind does not or will not recognize him, and seem as uncertain of their own identity as they are of his. Shelly, the outsider, has only Vince's recollections to rely on in making her way around the old



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homestead: she is amused and amazed at what she finds, so close and yet so far from what she expected.

**SHELLY:** It's like a Norman Rockwell cover or something.

**VINCE:** What's the matter with that? It's American.

**SHELLY:** Where's the milkman and the little dog? Spot. Spot and Jane. Dick and Jane and Spot. (p. ۸۳)

But Shelly feels no more out of place than Vince does. His family has never seen her before and treats her accordingly, with unknowing looks, but offer Vince the same welcome. As Shelly tries to explain their presence, Dodge simply stares: "...I mean, Vince has this thing about his family now. I guess it's a new thing with him. I kind of find it hard to relate to. But he feels it's important. I mean, he feels he wants to get to know you all again. After all this time" (p. ۸۶). Though he will not recognize Vince as his grandson, Dodge does treat him as a child, taking the tone of angry parent, for he acts, at first, as if the young man is Tilden:

**VINCE:** Grandpa, it's Vince. I'm Vince. Tilden's son. You remember (**DODGE stares at him**)

**DODGE:** You didn't do what you told me. You didn't stay here with me.

**VINCE:** Grandpa, I haven't been here until just now. I just got here.

**DODGE:** You left. You went outside like we told you not to do. You went out there in back. In the rain.

**SHELLY: Is he okay? (p. ٨٧).**

Not surprisingly, Tilden hasn't a clue as to who this young man might be, though sons are a subject with which he is not entirely unfamiliar.

**SHELLY: (to TILDEN). Are you Vince's father?**

**TILDEN: Vince?**

**SHELLY: ( Pointing to VINCE). This is supposed to be your sons Is he your sons Do you recognize him? I'm just along for the ride here. I thought everybody knew each other!**

**(TILDEN stares at VINCE. Dodge wraps himself up in the blanket and sits on the sofa staring at the floor).**

**TILDEN: I had a son once but we buried him.**

**(p. ٩٢)**

Before the family secret (the buried child) is unearthed, Tilden and Dodge will attempt to bury another son, enshrouding Vince in a veil of forgetfulness, denying him life in forgetting that he's alive. Even after pulling out all the stops, performing a ludicrous dumbshow of all his childhood tricks to regain his place In the family portrait, Vince still draws a blank.

**VINCE: (To DODGE). I .Know Here's one you'll remember. You used to kick me out of the house for this one.**

**(VINCE pulls his shirt out of his belt and holds it tucked under his chin with his stomach exposed He grab the flesh of his**

belly button ai,u pyses it out to make it look like a mouth talking. He watches his belly button and makes a sounding cartoon voice to synchronized with the movement He demonstrat es it to DODGE then crosses down to TILDEN doing Both DODGE and TILDEN take short, uninterested glances, then ignore him).

VINCE: (deep cartoon voice). "Hello. How are you? I'm fine. Thank you very much. It's so good to see you looking well this fine Sunday morning. I was going down to the hardware store to fetch a pail of water".

SHELLY: Vince, don't be pathetic, will ya' (VINCE stops. Tucks his shirt in).

SHELLY: Jesus Christ. They're not gonna play. Can't you see that? (p. 96).

Anticipating a reasonable facsimile of a family reunion, Vince finds instead a crazy old man and a crazier young one, neither of whom answer to the names they are called, unwilling and unable to accommodate his expectations. For the Rockwell canvas has been splattered with what looks like blood: whose and how are the major questions to be resolved. Vince insists that he is member of this family: there is no mystery in his mind, but Dodge and Tilden will

concur with his assessment only after another riddle is concurrently solved, when another son, consigned to oblivion, comes home again.

The harder Vince presses his familial claim, the less Dodge seems to know him. Frustrated, he leaves the house to try and put the aborted homecoming in perspective, and more importantly, as far as Dodge is concerned, to buy the old man a bottle of whiskey. Leaving Shelly alone with Tilden and Dodge, the stranger with two stranger ones, affords an opportunity for the remaining family members to rattle a few skeletons in revealing to an outsider certain truths which the family cannot face and rarely discusses. Vince will not return until the next day, finding that he had to go farther than he thought to “figure out what’s going on” (p. ٩٨); by the time he returns, however, he will be accepted by his family because he will have fully accepted them-only in embracing his violent heritage will he be incorporated into the family circle. No sooner is Vince out of the house, than Dodge begins to worry that he will never return:

**DODGE:** Untrustworthy. Probably drown himself if he went out in the back. Fall right in a hole. I’d never get my bottle.

**SHELLY:** I wouldn’t worry about Vince. He can take care of himself.

**DODGE:** Oh, he can, huh? Independent.

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(p. 99).

Independence is a trait which Dodge admires in himself: earlier, he browbeat Tilden for his lack of it: "You're a grown man. You shouldn't be needing your parents at your age. It's unnatural. There's nothing we can do for you now anyway. I never went back to my parents. Never. Never even had the urge. I was independent. Always independent..." (p. 98). But Vince's resemblance to his grandfather extends far beyond the autonomy that skips generations. Earlier in the play, when objecting to the possibility of a Bradley-inflicted haircut, Dodge complains: "My appearance is out of his domain, It's even out of mine In fact, it's disappeared I'm an invisible.man (p. 98) Like father, like son, like grandson: the invisible man produced Tilden, the man who is not all there-in his place stands the shell of the man he once was-or was he? When Tilden left home, a man went away but a child returned, to haunt them. In refusing to acknowledge Vince, Dodge and Tilden would make him what they are-invisible-pretending that no one, neither son nor grandson, is there. But Vince's appearance is really out of their domain; they may pretend that he is not there or theirs, but his return to the fold is as inevitable as Dodge's bi-monthly haircut, a part of the family routine, the inexorable and unavoidable traditions that defy destruction,

however much the family desires their, and their own, end. Dodge refuses to play his part in the family masquerade: “Stop calling me Grandpa. It’s sickening. ‘Grandpa.’ I’m nobody’s Grandpa” (p. ٩٠). But he does answer to “Dodge,” a name more appropriate for a man who avoids all emotional responsibility. As he says to Shelly: “...You got some funny ideas. Some damn funny ideas. You think just because people propogate they have to love their offspring? You never seen a bitch eat her puppies?” (p. ١١٢) Though he may not feel the part, he certainly looks it; even Dodge cannot ignore the striking resemblance of past to present, the unavoidable similarity between himself and Vince, what was and what will be, with Tilden as intermediary, mirroring both of them and forcing their focus on another invisible form, a family member no longer with them, gone but not forgotten.

With Vince’s departure, Shelly begins to make friends with Tilden, as the two participate in a typical family activity: preparing dinner.

**TILDEN:** You like carrots.

**SHELLY:** Sure. I like all kinds of vegetables. (p. ٩٣). In engaging his trust, Shelly begins to bring him out, and Tilden admits that something about Vince is familiar:

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**SHELLY:** It'd be cruel if you recognized him and didn't tell him. Wouldn't be fair.

**TILDEN:** I thought I recognized him. I thought I recognized something about him.

**SHELLY:** You did?

**TILDEN:** I thought I saw a face inside his face. (p. 111).

In sealing their friendship, Tiden tells Shelly a secret, one he has been dying to tell, a secret that has almost destroyed him.

**TILDEN:** We had a baby. He did. Dodge did. Could pick it up with one hand. Put it in the other. Little baby. Dodge killed it...

Nobody could find it. Just disappeared. Cops looked for it. Neighbors. Nobody could find it... Finally, everybody just gave up. Just stopped looking. Everybody had a different answer. Kidnap. Murder. Accident. Some kind of accident.

(**DODGE** struggles to walk toward TILDEN and falls. TILDEN ignores him).

**DODGE:** Tiden, you shut up. You shut up about it.

(**DODGE** starts coughing on the floor. SHELLY watches him the stool).

**TILDEN:** Little tiny baby just disappeared. It's not hard. It's so small. Almost invisible.

(SHELLY makes a move to DODGE.  
TILDEN firmly pushes her back  
down on the stool DODGE keeps  
coughing).

TILDEN: He said he had his reasons. Said it  
went a long way back. But he  
wouldn't tell anybody.

DODGE: Tilden! Don't tell her anything  
Don't tell her:

TILDEN: He's the only one who knows  
where it's buried. The only one. Like  
a secret buried treasure. Won't tell  
me or mother or even Bradley.  
Especially Bradley. Bradley tried to  
force it out of him but he wouldn't  
tell. Wouldn't even tell why he did it.  
One night he just did it.

(DODGE's coughing subsides....) (p. ١٠٤).

This tale told by an idiot signifies nothing more than the truth:  
Tilden could certainly be considered an unreliable source, but the  
truth of what he says is verified by Dodge's efforts to silence him. The  
"face-Inside-the-face" that Tilden saw in Vince is that of another son,  
Vince's brother, the buried child, fathered by Tilden, not by Dodge,  
the issue of an incestuous relationship with Halie. Having usurped his  
father's place this one time, with disastrous results, Tilden abdicates  
all responsibility (he can acknowledge only one son, another in "a  
long line of corpses" (p. ١١٢), from which, Dodge insists, they are all  
descended. Vince will succeed Dodge as the head of the family,



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inheriting the family fortunes, not only the house, "all the furnishings, accoutrements and paraphernalia therein" (p. 129), but more importantly, the consequences of their actions, as their past presses on his future.

After seeing what has become of his family, Vince's first instinct, reasonably enough, is to run, to "just disappear." But enroute to an unknown destination, Vince watches his reflection in the car windshield and experiences a vision similar to Tilden's, seeing not just one face-within-a-face, but generations of faces to be countenanced, each different but intrinsically the same.

**VINCE: (pause delivers speech front). I was gonna run last night. I was gonna run and keep right on running. I drove all night. Clear to the Iowa border. The old man's two bucks sitting right on the seat beside me. It never stopped raining the whole time. Never stopped once. I could see myself in the windshield. My face. My eyes. studied my face. Studied everything about it. As though I was looking at another man. As though I could see his whole race behind him. Like a mummy's face. I saw him dead and alive at the same time. In the same breath. In the windshield, I watched him breathe as though he was frozen in time. And every breath marked**

him .Marked him forever without him knowing. And then his face changed. His face became his father's face. Same bones. Same eyes. Same nose. Same breath. And his father's face changed to his Grandfather's face. And it went on like that. Changing. Clear on back to faces I'd never seen before but still recognized. Still recognized the bones underneath. The eyes. The breath. The mouth. I followed my family clear to Iowa. Every last one. Straight into the Corn Belt and further. Straight back as far as they'd take me. Then it all dissolved. Everything dissolved. (p. ۱۳۰).

Vince's vision may dissolve into the mist of a rainy night but his family, even in its advanced stage of decomposition, has not entirely broken up, and will not go away. The family hierarchy has been violated, resulting in an unnatural order of succession, but succeed Vince must, and on their terms.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, another scene is being set, as the rest of the cast assembles, like the characters in the last act of a mystery play, each more suspicious than the next, waiting for the detective to define their guilt or innocence, in reminding them that difference between right and wrong exists. This is the realm which most inhabit, living according to the difference between right and

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wrong, neither right nor wrong, but somewhere in-between, in a neutral zone, a neitherworld captured in shades of gray on the artist's canvas. In such a world, fingering the culprit is easy, for everyone is guilty: naming the crime is the hard part. What these people have done wrong has less to do with crimes for which they can be tried in a court of law; they have tried and failed to be a family according to natural law, and they suffer for their self-inflicted aberration. Prosecution is pointless when they are guilty of self-persecution: the family circle encompasses both wrong and retribution, swallowing it up; their original sin sustains them in providing the tie that binds: this family is a coherence of corruption but an entity nonetheless.

By process of elimination, Shelly plays the detective, apart yet a part of all this, an involved outsider attempting to solve, or at least sort out, the family wrong.

**DODGE:** (laughing to himself) She thinks she's going to get it out of us .She thinks she's going to uncover the truth of the matter. Like a detective or something.

**BRADLEY:** I 'm not telling her anything Nothing's wrong here Nothin's ever been wrong Nothing ever happened that's bad! Everything's the way it's supposed

to be Everything is all right here! We're  
all good peoples (p. ۱۲۲).

Shelly is getting fed up, for nothing is what she expected: “.... I don't need any words from you. I'm not threatening anybody. I don't even know what I'm doing here. You all say you don't remember Vince, okay, maybe you don't. Maybe it's Vince that's crazy. Maybe he's made this whole family thing up. I don't even care any more. I was just coming along for the ride. I thought it'd be a nice gesture. Besides, I was curious. He made all of you sound familiar to me. Every one of you. For every name, I had an image. Everytime he'd tell me a name, I'd see a person. In fact, each of you was so clear in my mind that I actually believed it was you. I really believed when I walked through the door that the people who lived here would turn out to be the same people in my imagination. But I don't recognize any of you. Not one. Not even the slightest resemblance” (p. ۱۲۲). Nothing is what she expected and nothing is what she finds. Instead of “turkey dinners and apple pie and all that kinda stuff” (p. ۹۱), the truth to be swallowed is that the “all-American” family is self-destructing before her eyes, choking on the realization that the center holds but the core is corrupt. Dodge cracks under her questioning, willingly telling all and relishing the opportunity to implicate the family in crimes for which no punishment fits.

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**DODGE:** . . .Halie got pregnant again. Outa' the middle a' nowhere she got pregnant. We weren't plannin' on havin' any more boys. We had enough boys already. In fact, we hadn't been sleepin' in the same bed for about six years...Halie had this kid. This baby boy...Almost killed her, but she had it anyway. It lived, see. It lived. It wanted to grow up in this family. It wanted to be just like us. It wanted to be a part of us. It wanted to pretend that I was its father. She wanted me to believe in it. Even when everyone around us knew. Everyone. All our boys knew. Tilden knew...Tilden was the one who knew. Better than any of us. . .Used to hear him singin' to it...Even when he knew it couldn't understand him. Couldn't understand a word he was saying. Never would understand him. We couldn't let a thing like that continue. We couldn't allow that to grow up right in the middle of our lives. It made everything we'd accomplished look like nothin'. Everything was cancelled out by this one mistake. This one weakness.

**SHELLY:** So you killed him?

**DODGE:** I killed it. I drowned it. Just like runt of a litter. Just drowned it.

**HALIE:** Ansel would've stopped him. Ansel would've stopped him from telling these lies. He was a hero! A man! A whole man What's happened to the men in this family? Where are the men? (p. 124)

On cue, Vince reappears with an answer to Halie's question-the only answer that the future seems to hold. As a practical consideration, Shepard translates the violence of Vince's re-entry into a form which the audience will understand and appreciate: Vince behaves like a crazed veteran of some foreign war, though his battle was fought on a domestic front. Dodge has just dropped his own bomb by verifying the tale that Tilden told; Vince re-enters the scene, as he entered the play, to continue the pattern set by Dodge. Bombs bursting in air, he punctuates what he has to say with the sound of smashing liquor bottles (which he has emptied)

VINCE: (singing loudly as he hurls bottles). "From the Halls of Montezuma to the Shores of Tripoli. We will, fight our country's battle on the land and on the sea".

(He punctuates the words " Montezuma" "Tripoli," "battles", "and "sea" with a smashed bottle each. He stops throwing for a second,, stares toward stage right of the porch, shades with his hand as though looking across to a battle field, then cups in his hands around mouth and yells across the space of the porch to an imaginary army. The others watch in terror and expectation).

VINCE: (To imagined Army). Have you had enough over there? 'Cause there's a lot more here where that came from. (pointing to paper full of bottles). A helluva lot more! We got enough over here to blow you from here to Kingdomcome (p. ۱۲۵)

What Vince must admit is that, like his family, he no longer knows

himself.

**SHELLY:** Vince?

**VINCE:** Who? What? Vince who? Who's that in there?...

**HALIE:** Vincent? Is that you, Vincent?

**VINCE:** Vincent who? What is this? Who are you people?

**SHELLY:** Hey, wait a minute. Wait a minute What's going on?

**HALIE:** We thought you were a murderer or something. Barging in through the door like that.

**VINCE:** I am a murderer? Don't underestimate me for a minute! I'm the Midnight Strangler I devour whole families in a single gulp. (pp. 125-6).

The family he has swallowed whole is his, as he inherits both their private causes and personal effects. This violent demonstration proves that Vince is one of them; shortly after his performance, Dodge names his grandson as his prime beneficiary. (Though Tilden gets the power tools' .That is, if he ever shows up again' (p. 129.)) But even without reading the will, Vince clearly has inherited his grandfather's spirit of family feeling-his will-in the total disregard he displays for the rest of the family, determining to follow Dodge's example in ignoring them as his grandfather and his father ignored him. Dodge has much to say in the course of the play, and though, as

the stage directions indicate, he proclaims“ his last will, and testament (p. ۱۲۹), he is denied a death scene, instead dying in a parenthetical aside: "(Dodge is dead. His death should have come completely unnoticed...)" (p. ۱۳۱). The invisible man dies as he lived, part of the furniture, indivisible from the sofa. [۱۷]

But before the act of succession is completed, Vince must also make a major and final concession. Simply, “Vince” is no more; he assumes a new identity, the one Dodge relinquishes in dying. But if Vince is no more, neither is anyone else .Shelly wondered if “Maybe (Vince] made this whole family thing up” (p. ۱۲۱). Now, although Halie and Bradley remain, as well as the remains of Dodge, the family is his alone, and more specifically, him alone. He makes up the whole family; as far as Vince is concerned, along with the house, he has fallen heir to thin air, as he tells Father Dewis: There is nobody else in this house. Except for you. And you’re leaving, aren’t you? (p. ۱۳۱).

In finding himself the latest in a line of bloody kings, Vince has awoken to, not from, Macbeth’s nightmare: the face he saw in the car windshield, “dead and alive at the same time,” was his own reflection. It is his responsibility to continue the family: “I gotta carry on the line. I gotta see to it that things keep rolling” (p. ۱۳۰). But in a new



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twist on "boy meets-gets-loses girl," girl loses boy, as Shelly leaves and Vince, Dodge-like, impassively watches her go, lost in his reflections. Though heir apparent, it is unlikely that he will become a parent, remaining the invisible man but maintaining the tradition of the family that is and is naught.

But the final image of the family at the end of its line is a lasting one. Having assumed her position at the top of the stairs, still unaware that Dodge is dead, Halie calls down to Vince, who has taken Dodge's place on the sofa. She is amazed at what she sees in the backyard: their vegetable garden, ignored for so many years, has suddenly flourished on neglect:

**HALIE'S VOICE:**

Dodge? Is that you, Dodge? Tilden was right about the corn, you know. I've never seen such corn. Have you taken a look at it lately? Tall as a man already. This early in the year. Carrots too. Potatoes. Peas. It's like a paradise out there, Dodge. You oughta' take a look. A miracle. I've never seen it like this. Maybe the rain did something. Maybe it was the rain.  
(p. 132).

What Halie sees is nothing compared to the sight that Vince ignores in the living room. Tilden has been among the missing

for most of the play, physically absent, though not really missed, for the entire third act. He has been on his own mission, with his own truth to bring home; he now returns with his own treasure, having finally located the secret grave of the buried child:

(... TILDEN appears from stage left, dripping with mud from the knees down. His arms arid hands are cover with mud. In his hands he carries the corpse of a small child at the chest level, staring down at it. The corpse mainly consists of bones wrapped in muddy, rotten cloth moves slowly down toward the staircase, ignoring VINCE on the sofa. VINCE keeps staring at the ceiling as though TILDEN wasn't there. As Halie's VOiCE continues TILDEN slowly makes his way up the stairs. His eyes never leave the corpse of the child. The lights keep fading).

HALIE'S VOICE:

Good hard rain. Takes everything down to the roots. The rest takes care of itself. You can't interfere with it. It's all hidden. It's all unseen. You Just gotta wait till it pops up out of the ground...It's a miracle, Dodge. I've never seen anything like this in my whole life. Maybe it's the sun. That's it. Maybe it's the sun. (p. ۱۳۲).

Halie twice repeats her rhetorical question but only one answer is possible. Clearly, it is the son, the never-named child, who has finally

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made appearance, no longer buried in the past nor distanced in the imagination. Children should be seen and not heard; first heard about, then seen, the family secret is again revealed, as Tilden stands with his son in his arms, holding the future of this family, a future held in obedience if family tradition is obeyed. Macbeth feared that his horrific vision, the line of bloody kings, would “stretch out to the crack of doom.” For this family, that day may break sooner than expected. Buried Child is also a children's story, a frightening fairy tale full of monsters and deep, dark secrets. As Halie says to Father Dewis: ! just a reflection of the times, don't you think, Father An indicaton of where we stand?...Yes, a sort of bad omen. Our youth becoming monsters” (p. 117). Yet even a fairy tale gains a certain expediency when “once upon a time” is yesterday, and the “crack of doom” is dawning.

Thus, as it has been mentioned previously that violence often results when difference and distinction (within a family or an entire culture ) collapse; violence is the reflex action of a cultural system attempting to reassert its own integrity and difference , and thus its identity . The violation of the family is by the family and for the family.

**Macbeth : Though art too like the spirit of  
Banque. Down! Thy crown doth sear ine  
eyeballs. And thy hair,  
Thou other gold –bound brow, is like the  
first.**

**A third is like the former. Filty \hags !**

**Why do you show me this ? A fourth? Start ,  
eyes !**

**What will the line stretch out to the crack of  
doom?**

**Another yet? A seventh? I'll see no more .**

**And yet the eighth appears, who bears a  
glass**

**Which shows me many more; annd some I  
see**

**Horrible siht! Now I see 'tis trye;**

**For the blood-boltered Banquo smiles upon  
mAnd points at them for his. ( Apparitions  
descend). What? Is this so? Macbeth ( IV.i)**

**Shelly: Look , you think you're bad off, what  
about me ? Not only don't they recognize me  
but I've never seen them efore in my life. I  
don't before in my life . I don't know who  
these guys are. They could be nobody.  
(Buried Child, Act II).**

Notes

1. Rene girard , Violence and the Sacred trans. Patrick Gregory (Batimore : Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977 ), p.31.
2. Girard, p.244.
3. Girard, p.1.
4. Girard,p.8.
5. Girard,p.13.
6. Girard, p. 7.
7. Girard, p.19.
8. Girard,p. 14.
9. Girard, p. 18.
10. Girard, p. 94.
11. Girard, p. 48.
12. Girard, p. 49.
13. Girard,p.49.
14. Girard, p. 56 .
15. Girard, p. 73.

١٦. Girard, p. ٧١.

١٧. Sophocles, The Oedipus Cycle trans. Gitts & Fitzgerald (New York : harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. , ١٩٦٩), p. ٣٢.

١٨. Girard, pp. ٧٣-٧٤.

١٩. Sophocles, p. ٣٠.

٢٠. Girard, p. ٧٢. As he continues : " At this point a strange and well-nigh fantastic thought suggests itself. If we eliminate the testimony brought against Oedipus in the second half of the tragedy, then the conclusion of the myth, far from seeming a sudden lightning flash of the truth, striking down the guilty party and illuminating all the mortal participants, seems nothing more than the camouflaged victory of one version its rival – the community's formal acceptance of Tiresias's and Creon's version of the story, threerafter held to be the true and universal version , the verity behind the myth itself . " (p.٧٣).

٢١. Girard, p. ٧٥.

٢٢. Girard, p.٧١.

٢٣. Girard, p. ٢٥٩.

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24. Sophocles, p. 56.

25. Sam Shepard, Seven Plays (New York: Bantam Books, Inc. , 1981) p. 124. All textual references are to be appeared from this edition.

26. Girard, Rene, Pathways to Madness. New York : Random House, 1965.

In Pathways to Madness, Jules Henry neatly ecapsulates his explanation for this phenomenon: " the family , however , is merely the place where the general pathology of the culture is incubated and finally transmitted into individual psychosis.... The family merely distills into lethal dose what exists in the culture at large" (p.298).

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